

Pussy Kayaks and Peach Pits

by [Lillian Jacobs](#)

My uterus is the pit of a white peach. It sits on a pink table, and as filmmaker Sindha Agha talks to me about hysterectomies, I watch a gloved hand holding a pair of tweezers pull the pit from view. *Cut.* She begins telling me about her medically-induced menopause, and suddenly, I am a rotting pomegranate. For a moment, I see my mother in the seeds, riding the waves of an experience that awaits me far in the future. I had never thought of us as a peach and a pomegranate until now.

When I think of myself as a peach, I know that it is not literal. Metaphor is not limited to written word; when translated into film, its potency shifts, and the visuals become less imaginative and more specific, vivid, and visceral. Sindha Agha exhibits her acute awareness of film's sensuous power in her 2018 short film entitled *Birth Control Your Own Adventure*. Agha makes brilliant use of vibrant colors and visual storytelling to engage our senses. She also maintains a distinctly light-hearted tone – one reflective of the attitudes women are told to hold toward their mental and physical health.

In the film – part documentary, part memoir, Agha takes us through her journey with hormonal contraceptives and explores their effect on her mental health. Her story begins at the age of eleven and is broken down into six segments, each chronicling a change in hormone intake and the impact it had on Agha. Every experience she dissects – a conversation, a long drive, a children's ballet – is colored by her unique metaphorical approach to storytelling. While the story ends in the present, Agha denies her audience a definitive conclusion – she wants us to understand that this is an ongoing narrative both for her and others like her. The film calls into question the silent suffering encoded in the 'female' experience (female here refers to the gendered

expectations imposed upon those assigned female at birth). By drawing attention to the lack of awareness about the side effects of hormonal birth control, Agha's film addresses a broader absence of compassion for women.

Birth Control Your Own Adventure is well-situated to explore the internalized oppression experienced by many individuals with uteruses who have confronted patriarchal expectations for complacency in their lives. The film uses a striking visual style and an honest narrative approach to represent both the internal and the external elements of women's relationship with their bodies. Agha brings tremendous vulnerability to her filmmaking, touching on the many ways patriarchy conditions women to suffer in silence, denying them an autonomous relationship with their bodies. The film raises an important question: how does film as a visual language situate itself between the internal, often physical experiences of individuals and the external identities of the audience, and how does this positioning relate to visibility and representation?

In addressing these questions, it is valuable to examine the past. Eighty-seven years before Agha would release her film about women's bodies, Virginia Woolf stood at a podium at the National Society for Women's Service and spoke to a room of young women about *her* body. To be more accurate, Woolf talked about her inability to talk about her body. "Professions For Women," an abridged version of Woolf's speech, explores the experience of being a 'woman writer' and the tension between Woolf's impulse to write candidly and her internalized desire to stay silent and accommodate men (Woolf). These struggles with internalized sexism take on additional significance in light of her suicide ten years later, following an arduous battle with bipolar disorder that was never adequately treated or taken seriously. Manuela V. Boiera et al. write that the therapies prescribed to Woolf "consisted mainly in gaining weight, sleeping, and 'rest of the intellect.'" The lack of compassionate, effective forms of therapy and treatment for her mental illness – another manifestation of repression in her time –

cannot be separated from the sinister toll of internalized misogyny on women that Woolf details.

Like Woolf's lecture, Agha's film brings to light how internalized sexism causes women to suffer in silence and normalize their pain. In particular, she draws attention to the side effects of hormonal contraceptives that often go unacknowledged, addressing them through an intimate, personal lens by recounting her own experiences with birth control and endometriosis. Woolf also examines how patriarchy silences and normalizes shame about the female body, rendering a transparent relationship between women and their bodies almost impossible.

In a room full of a new generation of aspiring young women, Woolf spoke of a second form of consciousness—a presence or phantom that exists in women as a barrier to accessing their authentic thoughts and actions. According to Woolf, female artists and writers have “many ghosts to fight, [and] many prejudices to overcome” in their creative processes (Woolf). She explains this image of “ghosts” in different ways: she speaks of “The Angel in the House” as a phantasmic manifestation of her internalized misogyny and also describes more indirectly her reticence to discuss the female body. Woolf, in dramatizing her creative process, writes:

The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was roused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. (Woolf)

Here, Woolf suggests the idea of reclaiming the ‘female’ body as a subject for women’s art; by openly discussing our bodies we can assert dominance over ourselves, a dominance historically denied by patriarchal assertions of control over women’s bodies and lives. Agha’s work claims this dominance: her film makes strikingly visible the

connection between her body and the space it occupies, asserting her control over the narrative of her life, her body, and her identity.

While Woolf's interest lies more in the *invisible* struggles faced by female artists, philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah raises the issue of *visible* representation in his essay "What Does It Mean to 'Look Like Me'?" Appiah emphasizes the importance of representing a variety of identities in visual media, including film. While discussing films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Black Panther*, Appiah illustrates how the onscreen presence of immediately recognizable identities can be immensely beneficial for marginalized communities. Appiah also draws attention to the fluidity of perception and recognition, reminding readers that some of the most effective artistic works "gain potency by complicating our received notions of identity," theorizing them as "less a mirror than a canvas and everyone has a brush" (Appiah). In Appiah's account, viewers play an active role in self-identification when interacting with any form of visual media, especially those that invite engagement through thoughtful and inclusive representation. Appiah goes on to note that "[w]hat the visual metaphor usually signifies . . . is a kinship of social identity," suggesting that the immediacy and recognizability of visual languages like film can become a tool for meaningful connection, allowing viewers to find validation by identifying with an experience represented on-screen.

While some identities are external and easily perceived, others are not. There is a difference, then, between immediately recognizable representations and those that require further explanation and deeper understanding. Appiah examines representation through a lens trained on clearly identifiable identities, whereas Agha's film explores a different kind of representation – making the internal external. Mental and physical illness are critically underrepresented in visual media because they are often internal conditions; their representation requires more than putting a person in front of a camera. Agha could record herself living her day-to-day life and you would never

know that she had endometriosis unless she told you. Agha communicates these internal experiences poignantly through visual metaphors – uterine pain is a crumpled red tissue paper, anxiety is a can of soup, and an IUD is a tampon stabbed by two Q-Tips. These mundane items become powerful visual tools: metaphors externalizing internal experiences through the stories they help her to tell. By giving physicality to an issue so commonly ignored and hidden away, Agha’s film bridges Woolf and Appiah’s viewpoints; she creates a new form of representation for an identity otherwise difficult to represent, and, in doing so, brings to light internalized struggles that often go unacknowledged when people are unable to communicate openly about them. Metaphor makes the immaterial material, and film is a tremendous tool for accomplishing this task.

Film also evokes empathy, allowing a general audience to relate to nuanced and complex problems through its visual symbolism and language. When Woolf lectures on the internal and invisible struggles that she and others like her face, she focuses on how women are conditioned to be silent about their true feelings – to accommodate, to placate, and to prioritize the feelings and experiences of others over their own. On the other hand, when Appiah talks about similar issues of representation, his conversation shifts to external signifiers: the immediate recognition of someone portrayed in visual media to whom you can relate. These concepts are not so dissimilar – we are all just looking to be seen and to see ourselves in others. Agha thus cements a connection between Appiah and Woolf: she takes the ideas about the internal that Woolf was so passionate about and represents them in the visual, external, and accessible way Appiah elaborates.

Japanese visual artist Megumi Igarashi showcases similar techniques in her work. She 3-D printed her vulva as a kayak – yes, a kayak. Igarashi paddled inside this kayak – bright, highlighter yellow, taller than me – across the Tama River between Tokyo and Kanagawa, smiling at a camera that would land her not only on the world stage, but

also in a Japanese courtroom. Igarashi's project, intended to illustrate the pervasive sexualization of 'female' bodies and body parts, ended up getting her arrested *twice* in 2014 for "obscenity" (Cascone). Court photographers show her fighting the Japanese legal system with the same smile she gave to us, her viewers, on her kayak's maiden voyage (Cascone). When I first heard of Igarashi's kayak, I will admit that my own *Angel in the House* tapped me on my shoulder, softly, with a sneer. *Why on earth would she want people to see that?* Then I realized: my reaction is exactly why.

Igarashi's work draws attention to the 'female' body – she wants it to be loud, colorful, and tangible in order to normalize a subject so often avoided as taboo. While writing this essay, I have come to think of Igarashi and Agha as two visual artists who use their works similarly to externalize parts of themselves that polite society deems unseemly. What would Virginia Woolf think, I have wondered, if she were to see the photo of Igarashi smiling, laughing, and in a wetsuit in a vagina kayak? Is Igarashi's work, I have also wondered, what Appiah means when he emphasizes the importance of seeing "someone who looks like me"? To me, this is exactly what Igarashi accomplishes. She, like Agha, uses the language of visual representation to destigmatize and externalize the internal, creating awareness and solidarity among women told to be ashamed of their bodies and the life-giving and life-sustaining processes that take place inside them.

Agha's film struck a nerve: it was the first time I had heard anyone other than my doctor or my mother mention PMDD (Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder). I tried the medication Yaz, like Agha. Lo Loestrin, too. These medications were supposed to help me cope with the anxiety that would come on every month like a fever blister, turning my mind into an open wound. I took them at noon so I wouldn't have to get up early, which meant more often than not that my alarm would go off in school; I would sheepishly pull out the small black compact from my bag and quickly pop something

bluepinkwhite into my mouth. A girl I barely knew once asked me where to buy Plan B because she knew I had “experience.” I told her the truth: I didn’t know.

To put my experience in a language similar to Agha’s: I have felt like somebody is cooking soup inside of me for a very long time. It may come as a surprise that I do not talk about these experiences often. When you combine the stigmas surrounding the female body and mental health, you get a festering black hole, a quiet obscenity whispered behind the back of public decency – Woolf telling a room of young women to murder the voice in their head that tells them no and then walking into a river with her pockets full of rocks. I find myself surprised every time someone mentions experiences like mine, because I was made to believe they were uncommon and shameful. But Sindha Agha and I took the same birth control, and Megumi Igarashi paddled across a lake in her own vagina. These women invite me into “a kinship of social identity”, as Appiah puts it, but they do so through a visual language that brings something deeply internalized onscreen and into public consciousness. They not only externalize and represent my experiences, but validate them. If someone can make a film about people like me and my uterus can be a peach pit on a pink table, what have I been hiding for?

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